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Fiery Iron Range lawmaker Tom Rukavina dies at 68 after leukemia battle



Gubernatorial candidate Tom Rukavina gestures while speaking during the DFL Convention Saturday Apr.24, 2010 at the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center in Duluth, Minn. (Clint Austin / caustin@duluthnews.com)

By **FORUM NEWS SERVICE** |

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Tom Rukavina, a fiery Iron Range politician who made his mark in the Minnesota House and ended his political career last week as a St. Louis County commissioner, has died.

“I’m terribly saddened to learn about the passing of my friend, former State Rep. Tom Rukavina,” Minnesota DFL Chairman Ken Martin said in a statement. “Tom was a bulldog for not only his constituents on the Iron Range, but all of the working men and women in Minnesota. Tom Rukavina was known for his honesty, his authenticity and his advocacy for those trying to build a better life for their families. Today Minnesota lost a one-of-a-kind individual who left a deep impression on everyone who knew him.”

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar sent her own tribute Monday afternoon: “As Tom would tell it, he was for the little fellers, not the Rockefellers — a tribute to his friend and the late Sen. Paul Wellstone, who died in a plane crash on his way to attend a funeral for Tom’s father, Bennie. Tom also taught his children the value of service. His daughter, Ida, leads my Northern Minnesota office and shares her father’s strength and tenacity. My prayers are with Ida and the entire Rukavina family today.”

Rukavina decided last year not to run for a second term on the County Board because he was devoting time to be treated for his illness.

Rukavina, DFL-Pike Township, was first elected to the House District 5A seat in 1986. He often made up for his lack of physical size — he was about 5 feet, 3 inches tall — with an explosive personality as he battled for Democratic causes from organized labor to social programs to public funding for economic development.

“Tommy, you have been a terrific champion for the people of the Iron Range, for all of Minnesota,” then Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton said during a 2012 roast after Rukavina’s retirement from state politics. “That’s because you spoke from your convictions, from your heart and from your soul.”

Legislatively, Rukavina may be best known for bills requiring mining companies to keep their plants intact and maintained during the shutdowns, even bankruptcies, of the 1980s. That allowed all of the plants to re-open, sometimes after multiple shutdowns during economic downturns.

When he retired from the House, Rukavina cited as successes a \$50 million endowment at UMD’s Natural Resources Research Institute and a new mining studies scholarship offered at University of Minnesota campuses, all funded by royalties from

While Rukavina once boasted that he was the last socialist in the Minnesota Legislature, in later years he became an unabashed supporter of the same multinational mining and steel companies he once disparaged for being unfair to union Steelworkers. Rukavina also had become one of the biggest supporters of expanding the Iron Range's existing taconite industry and delving into a new generation of copper mining to bolster job opportunities for local people.

Rukavina made his political start on the Virginia School Board and Pike Town Board in the 1970s. He lost his first DFL primary race for Legislature in 1982 but then won in 1986 when the incumbent, Dom Elloff, left the primary race. Before becoming a full-time lawmaker, he worked as a logger and as a naturalist at the Ironworld Discovery Center in Chisholm, worked for a time at the Minntac taconite plant and as an assistant director at Giants Ridge Golf and Ski Resort. He ran unsuccessfully for the DFL convention endorsement for governor in 2010.

He ran for an open seat on the St. Louis County Board in 2014, easily gaining victory for the district that covers the northern half of the giant county.

Mike Jugovich, 7th District St. Louis County commissioner, was on his way to the swearing-in of Rukavina's replacement on the county board, Paul McDonald.

The event, Monday afternoon in Ely, promised to be downcast with the news.

"I'm going to miss him so much," Jugovich said. "It didn't make any difference if you were Tommy's friend or not, he could fight with you until the bitter end and go have a beer afterward. I loved him — a wonderful person."

Jugovich is the former mayor of Chisholm, where he got to know Rukavina.

"If he was going to champion something he was all in — 110 percent," Jugovich said. "No one fought harder or longer. He believed in what he was doing. He was a model for people in politics."

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